

Testimony of Susan Gunderman
Program Operations Director for Reentry Services, Community Partners in Action, Inc.

**H.B. No. 6659 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025,
AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR. (Transportation and Judicial & Corrections Agencies)**

FEBRUARY 24, 2023

My name is Susan Gunderman and I am the Program Operations Director for Reentry Services for **Community Partners in Action, Inc. (CPA)**

I am submitting this testimony **in support of creating a Justice Reinvestment Fund in the Department of Correction's budget from the savings obtained through the closing of Willard Correctional Institution.** Reinvesting \$6.5 million dollars into community programs and services that implement innovative, data driven, and comprehensive approaches will assist with successful reintegration, strengthening communities and families, while decreasing recidivism and reducing crime to make our communities safer.

The reentry model we are urging the State to invest in are the **Reentry Welcome Centers** that exist in several cities in CT including Hartford, Waterbury, Bridgeport, New London and New Haven. **Community Partners in Action operates the Reentry Welcome Centers in Hartford and Waterbury.** Since opening our doors in Hartford in 2018, we have served over 1200 people. In Waterbury, we opened in December 2021 and have served nearly 120 people to date.

The Centers are **a collaboration of community partners working together to provide support services to individuals in all stages of the reentry process** – from pre-release to post-release to aftercare. They are a welcoming environment for people as they transition from prison back to the community.

Prior to the existence of the Centers, people discharging from prison were often dropped off on 'Main Street' or the 'Town Green' and left to fend for themselves. Now, the CT Department of Correction brings people leaving prison right to the doors of the Centers – a 'warm hand-off' and **we are prepared for their arrival.**

Participants of the Centers need assistance with just about everything: food, shelter, clothing, identification, transportation, along with a livable wage job. **Housing is a primary need** for people who seek services at the Centers. Living unsheltered puts people at greater risk of ending up in the emergency room or may lead them to commit new crimes as a desperate means of survival.

The less trauma people experience upon release and the safer and healthier their living environment, the less likely they are to return to using drugs and/or re-offend, and as a result, fewer people will cycle in and out of prison. In addition, **investing in a data-informed comprehensive reentry initiative makes good fiscal sense.**

For the past five years, community providers like CPA have been weaving together multiple grants to sustain our Centers. **With a public-private partnership, we would be able to sustain these Centers** beyond a typical grant cycle and ensure everyone returning home from incarceration is welcomed home with dignity and **provided the support and services they need to be contributing members of their family and community.**

Without reinvestment of these \$6.5 million of funds towards Connecticut's Reentry Welcome Centers and reentry programming, we are likely to see**

- less long-term financial stability,
- less families strengthened,

- less connections to trained and caring professionals able to offer professional services for individuals coming out of prison
- less connections to basic needs and recovery services to help deter crime and prevent people from returning to prison, and additional adverse outcomes.
- At the very least, we will not be able to meet these goals with the consistency and efficiency afforded by stronger state funding. While we continue to serve thousands of Connecticut residents, thousands more are still in need of services.

Reinvestment of these funds can improve community well-being for *all* of Connecticut's residents. Community Partners in Action is committed to offering innovative, comprehensive, and efficient services that help your constituents rebuild their lives upon release, for a fraction of prison.

For all of these reasons and more, Community Partners in Action strongly endorses creating a Justice Reinvestment Fund in the Department of Correction budget.

One of the oldest organizations of its kind in the country, Community Partners in Action (CPA) was founded nearly 150 years ago. CPA champions criminal justice reform and advocates for preserving human dignity. Through our programs that include reentry and housing, youth initiatives, a nationally recognized Prison Arts Program, and holistic alternatives to incarceration, we provide long-term impact that positively transforms individuals and society at large. Our work is possible due to partnerships with and support from individuals, government, private funders, organizations, and business. The mission of CPA is to build community by providing services that promote accountability, dignity and restoration for people affected by the criminal justice system.